HOMER FOR REAL:

A Reading of the *Iliad*

Also By Eric Larsen

An American Memory, a novel

I Am Zoë Handke, a novel

A Nation Gone Blind:

America in an Age of Simplification and Deceit

The End of the 19th Century, a novel

HOMER FOR REAL: A READING OF THE *ILIAD*

The First in a Series Called:
Great Literary Works
for Regular People:

A Course of Readings Drawn from
a Life in the Classroom

by
Eric Larsen

The Oliver Arts & Open Press

Copyright © 2009 by Eric Larsen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or
reproduced in any manner without written permissions
from the Publisher, except for brief quotations in
critical articles and reviews.

Quotations from Richmond Lattimore's *The Iliad of Homer*
are reprinted by the generous permission of the
University of Chicago Press.

Quotations from Robert Grudin's *American Vulgar: The Politics of
Manipulation Versus the Culture of Awareness* are made with permission
from Counterpoint Press

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Larsen, Eric, 1941-
Homer for Real: *A Reading of the* Iliad. *Volume One of Great Literary Works for
Regular People–A Course of Readings Drawn from a Life in the Classroom*

ISBN: 978-0-9819891-2-9

The Oliver Arts & Open Press
2578 Broadway (Suite #102)
New York, NY 10025
http://www.oliveropenpress.com

For my Students
Then and Now

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
ix

DAY ONE
1

DAY TWO
11

DAY THREE
35

DAY FOUR
49

DAY FIVE
91

DAY SIX
153

DAY SEVEN
185

BACK MATTER
215

Introduction

I was twenty-one years old, in what I remember as the particularly fragrant spring of 1963, when I taught my first college class. This was in Minnesota, at Carleton College. A conflict had come up to prevent Wayne Carver from meeting the Friday fourth-hour session of his sophomore survey course, and, instead of finding a colleague to cover for him, he graciously turned to me, a last-semester senior, and asked if I would fill in for the period. His request seemed to me a bit unreal and very flattering.

The day was sunlit and cool, with the smells of earth and moist greenery drifting in through big open windows. The preceding hour, at 10:00 a.m., I sat in Owen Jenkins' History of Literary Criticism, and, when that adjourned, I walked across to the other end of the building, still on second-floor Laird, to Wayne Carver's waiting class. The day's subject was Yeats, I remember, though how much work we covered I can't say. I do know that we went through "Among School Children" and "A Prayer for My Daughter," but anything else now escapes me.

I suppose I actually was, if barely, qualified to lead such a class. The term was at its end. I'd finished my six-hour written comprehensives, had passed my orals, and had submitted and defended my senior thesis. And I'd read a fair lot of Yeats.

It felt strange, though, to be at the front of the class instead of in it. I stood up through the hour instead of sitting at the chair and table in front not just because it felt more natural to me but because I'd observed the law of academics that, with rare exceptions, the more interesting instructors remained on their feet while the less interesting did not.

During the year after that, 1963-1964, I went to Iowa City for my Master's and spent no time in front of a class. Through the four decades from 1964 through 2005, however, not a year passed but that I spent at least part of it "in front." I was a teaching assistant in Madison, Wisconsin, for a year, an assistant professor in Wayne, Nebraska, for another, then a teaching assistant back in Iowa City for two more. From the fall of 1968 through the spring 1970 I taught in Europe with the University of Maryland. Then it was back to Iowa City for 1970-1971, and for the unbroken years from 1971 through 2005 I was at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the City University of New York.

Two–maybe three–things about John Jay are pertinent to this Introduction. The first is that when New York City all but went broke, in 1976, most of John Jay's traditional liberal arts majors were stripped away, including its English major, which at that time was but newly born. This denuding of the curriculum was done for economic reasons–other CUNY colleges could go on teaching the traditional liberal arts while John Jay would be required to focus solely on its own "mission" of criminal justice. It didn't seem to matter that no one knew or–at least not in my hearing over the next thirty-five years–was able to define exactly what "criminal justice" was or what it really consisted of.

But that couldn't be allowed to stand in the way of academic plan-

ning, and so our English major was taken away—as were the college's majors in history, philosophy, art, and so on. This meant that for the three decades that still lay stretched out ahead of me at John Jay, I would be relegated to freshman composition and sophomore surveys of literature, teaching these to students whose interests, generally speaking, lay far afield from either the humanities or from the art of writing.

I was extremely lucky, though, that one of the college's central founders—and its humanities head—had been Robert C. Pinckert, a powerfully educated traditionalist *and* a graduate of Columbia College, where, as a first-year student, he had gone through Columbia's famous "Lit Hum" courses. When Bob was designing the humanities part of what would be the "core" required of all students at John Jay, he constructed the literature surveys on the model of what he himself had studied at Columbia.

And so, thanks to Bob Pinckert, it came about that bare, homely John Jay was to be my Harvard and my Yale—and my Columbia, too. English major or no, I still had the great luck of being able to make my living by reading and teaching great stuff—real, substantive, interesting, historically and aesthetically important works of literature from Homer through Samuel Beckett.

It was not a life exotic or varied, but it was certainly rich. How can Hamlet, Dante, Chaucer, Homer, Milton, and Virginia Woolf *not* be rich? Admittedly, it wasn't the same as teaching Lit Hum two-and-a-half miles uptown would be, since the students at John Jay were very, very different from their Morningside Heights counterparts. I'll say more about my students in a moment, but first another word or two about the Pinckert and Columbia legacy.

Bob Pinckert was an exceptionally sure and perceptive judge of character, and as a result his early faculty appointments at John Jay were excellent. Not only did we have a strong department, but we

also enjoyed a generally shared view that the literature survey courses, as written, were solid, durable, worthwhile, rewarding both to us and to the students, and in need of no defense. They were not only a life raft, but the very best kind of life raft This state of general agreement, however, came under attack in the early 1990s when two things happened. Bob retired, for one, and the disease-flood of "political correctness" at last rose high enough to crest our own walls, sending ankle-deep water through the corridors.

And then it started getting deeper. New appointments to the English staff, as the decade wore on, came from what seemed to have become a different world entirely–and from a different kind of education entirely–than those of us from the Bob Pinckert generation had come from, been familiar with, and valued. I've written at length about these kinds of changes in my book *A Nation Gone Blind: American in an Age of Simplification and Deceit* (2006), and, as I point out there, it wasn't a matter of the new people not being smart–many of them were very, very smart indeed–but it was simply a matter of their not being literary.

As *A Nation Gone Blind* points out also, these were highly idealistic young people, impelled by extremely strong desires to do good in various social, cultural, and political ways–but, to repeat, they were neither literary in their thinking nor had they absorbed *literary* educations. Aesthetics or aesthetic judgment or aesthetic history or aesthetic pleasure meant nothing to them other than that they considered such things elitist and suffocating at worst and, at best, of absolutely *no* social, political, or cultural value or importance in the framework of their own reformist programs.

For reasons like these, the last fifteen years or so of my time at John Jay were defensive ones and by no means especially pleasant. Suddenly, a strong and highly contentious battle against the Lit Hum model was being mounted, and year by year, as ever more of the original Pinckert appointments reached retirement, fewer and fewer of us

remained to mount and sustain a defense.

What was it like? Well, the experience is described fully in *A Nation Gone Blind*, although here I can say that in great part it was a battle against intellectual–and most certainly literary–simplification. Books like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* were to replace *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to replace Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot.* The problem wasn't necessarily that these "replacement" works were "bad,"[1] though without question they were simple. And their simplicity revealed clearly that they had been chosen by instructors not on the basis of their unique or historical literary importance but on the basis of their providing evidence or undergirding for agendas of one social, political, or cultural sort or another. That the books favored by the "New Professors," as I privately named them, tended more and more to be current, recent, or contemporary works further underscored their intended use as agenda-supports–but, even more important, it also showed the new instructors' willingness to jettison history altogether in anything remotely akin to the deep sense of pastness that underlay the very formation of the Lit Hum sequences.

Up until I left John Jay, I was able to keep my own literature sections within the tradition they'd come from, but the effort to keep them that way put me into a state of social segregation from the rest of the teaching staff and I felt ostracized and quite alone–except for the company of one other fellow-laborer, Ira Bloomgarden. Ira dated back to the earliest of the Bob Pinckert days, was himself also profoundly educated–he, too, was a graduate of Columbia College–and by this time had become my longest-term remaining colleague and increasingly my closest friend. At the end, the two of us didn't so much bow out of the department or out of the college as merely disappear from both, our departures generally unremarked and unlamented by those

we were leaving behind.

Times change. Still, during the three-and-a-half decades of my own academic career, they *really* changed. What's become of things at the college since I left, I don't know. But, in some sense, it doesn't matter, since what I want to do here, in this first volume of the several others that I hope will follow it, is not to lament what may have happened *since* I left teaching, but, instead, to re-create the things that *did* happen in my own classrooms during the time when the tradition of Lit Hum was still their guiding spirit.

I said a moment ago that I would say something about my students, who, unquestionably, were very different from those on the famous Morningside Heights campus a couple of miles uptown. Students at John Jay were of every age, from those just out of high school to those in their sixties or even more. Some were policemen, some worked in city or federal agencies, there were a good many young mothers, and, taken all together, I would estimate that more than half of my students held down jobs. Close to half, I would say, came from blue-collar neighborhoods in the five boroughs or in northern New Jersey or the nearer reaches of Long Island. Something close to the other half came from what some would call the projects, others the ghetto, still others el barrio.

Excepting, on average, what I'd guess to be one to two percent of the overall population, my students were most, most clearly underprepared for college-level work. Again, with the few exceptions I've mentioned, their writing abilities, in the main, ranged from the barely adequate to very weak to all but non-existent. As for backgrounds in reading–again, with that tiny number of exceptions–it seemed that in high school they had done virtually no reading and had been encouraged to do even less. In a class of forty-five students, three or four hands would go up if I asked how many had read *1984* or *Animal Farm*. In the case of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, I got maybe one

hand a year, and it was the same for *any* book of Ernest Hemingway. As for the "classics," the books and works making up the courses I was about to teach, not only had they gone almost universally unread, but the recognition *most* familiar to me over the years was the recognition that almost none of my students had ever even *heard* of the books that we were now about to read.

Nevertheless, these were my students, I was their instructor, and Lit Hum formed the basis on which we were about to proceed. The work–from day one through day 1,960[2]–was never easy, for me or for them. For them, the assignments were hard, the style and language often difficult, the essays and the exams equally so. For me, *those* things weren't so hard, but plenty of other things *were*. Imagine what I faced, and how many things I invariably had to do at once. Most of the students were intimidated, and I had to charm every single one of them, in one way or another, into feeling equal to the work and to the books rather than dismally inferior to both. This feeling of intimidation among the students took many forms. Some students went sullen, and I had to reach out to them in any way I could. Others fell asleep–half due literally to too many hours on jobs, and half as a means of escape or insolence, the results of intimidation–and I had to reach out to *them*. Some, admittedly, were bored to death, and I had to reach out to *them*. Still others began catching on more quickly than the rest, and they'd begin to dominate or "act out," and I had to reach out to them to bring *them* back into the class as a coherent group.

It was like being an actor playing six roles at once, or a juggler doing what it is that jugglers do. How much easier it would have been–as, indeed, it later became for others–simply to teach easy books, like the ones I mentioned earlier, then to fit each book to an agenda, and get your students to feel at home with "literary" things *that* way.

But in exactly what sense would that really be literary? Toni Morrison, for example, is as much, and perhaps more, a *bad* example of a

novelist as she is a good one.[3] As for the other "easy" books mentioned earlier–yes, it would be nice to encourage students to become readers, but, once encouraged, *those* were all books they could easily read by and for themselves, at least far, far more so than they could Homer, Dante, Milton, or Aeschylus by or for themselves. And, too, even if a course made up only of "contemporary" works *could* be called "literary," it couldn't conceivably be a course claiming literary *history* as any central part of its substance or structure.

Among the important considerations of semester-long, or year-long, readings modeled on the Lit Hum courses is that they're fully intended to give readers some awareness of the three- or four-thousand-year *story* of literature. I myself call it the story-within-the-stories. The works of literature themselves have their own stories. But as you follow these onward, from one age to another–from as far back, say, as the epic of Gilgamesh, near 2,000 BC, up to Samuel Beckett, near 1945 AD–the story of the world itself gets told, the story of the changing world as it's reflected in and by those works.

I always felt that to *simplify* what I was able to offer to my students would amount in no uncertain terms to deprivation. In fact, it seemed to me that it would amount, really, to a betrayal. Almost none of these people had ever before been given a shot at the history of literature, or ever before been given a shot at the "classics" of literature. And if they weren't given a shot at those things *now*, at a time when there were means, motive, and opportunity–then, after that, when *would* they get a shot?

There were ancillary concerns, too, that had to do not with the students but with me. Conscience, for example, and what I thought of as honesty. I'd made the choice to get the education I'd gotten, and the choice to be trained to do what I now, furthermore, had contracted with the Department of Higher Education of New York State *to* do.

There'd be no living with myself if I didn't do all I could, if I didn't

fulfill the terms of my contract.

And so I set out trying to imitate the actor playing six or more roles at once–professor, comedian, disciplinarian, reader aloud, explainer of syntax, teller of anecdotes, builder of vocabulary, heroic advocate of literature and of its history. In class above all, I did everything possible to prevent there *ever* being a dull moment, or *ever* a moment of the least hesitation on my part about where to go next, what page to turn to, what next step to take. In every class, too, there had to be a structure of some kind that rose to a natural climax at the end, or to a perfect cliff-hanger, so as to link the day's work to the next day to come. All of this had to be done, too, within the self-imposed terms of my own inner clock, whose rule was that, at a minimum, ninety-five percent of each class period *had* to be spent in active and productive involvement with the day's material. If anything more than five percent of the period went unused, or was used unprofitably, I considered it a personal failure. It was hard work, yes, but when it went well–which wasn't always–the effect was glorious. By the end of those classes, I would have had almost the equivalent of a physical workout, my shirt well soaked as evidence. And thus went my decades-long effort to make the reading of these ancient, remote, often difficult books become no longer intimidating to my students, to make them seem a part of our own world while at the same time trying never, ever to lose the other vital essence of those books, which is that they really *are* remote and distant from our own world, that they really *are* very, very old.

As the era of the New Professors progressed in the early 1990's, I more and more regularly saw and heard other instructors addressing their students (and vice versa) on a first-name basis. This was something I could not and would not do. It had nothing whatsoever to do with affection for my students–I became extremely fond of many of them, you can be quite sure–but in class I explained to them that I was *not* their friend. I was instead something quite different altogether:

I was their *instructor*. I would then provide an illustrative example (or I would "put a case," as Jaggers would say in *Great Expectations*). Suppose a person were injured in a bad accident or suffered the sudden onset of a very serious disease. If this person went to a doctor for help, would he or she prefer that that doctor be a friend to the patient, or that the doctor be a *good doctor*?

Who, after all, would want emergency treatment, in even the most remote or least conceivable way, to be dependent upon the question of whether or not the doctor *liked* you?

Still, it was clear that I did need some way of being less formal in class than the instructors of my own ancient day had been–back when they'd called on us by preceding our surnames with Mr. or Miss.[4] Obviously *that* would no longer work–even though the truth is that I had actually done it myself in my first decade-and-a-half or so at John Jay. Later, though, it was obvious that I needed an alternative, and so I began adjectivizing each student's last name and following the result with the word "One." Kelly Cramer, by this method, became "the Cramerian One," Anthony Stefenese "the Stefenesian One," Mike Macdougal "the Macdougalian one" (accent on third syllable), Judy Berniay "the Berniayvian One," and Tony Santiago "the Santiogovian One" (accent on fourth syllable), and so on. I liked it, the students *very* much liked it, and it had the added merit of building pronunciation skills, of building up practice in the tripping of the tongue.

I've written this introduction as a means of suggesting exactly why it is that I'm embarking on this series of books about "great literature," books that I'm saying are intended "for all readers." But I've written the introduction also as a way of suggesting what I hope the quality and tone of those books will be–starting here, with *Homer For Real*. What I hope is that, to the best of my ability, I can transfer to the printed page the content and at least some part of the atmosphere of what

took place inside those three-and-a-half decades' worth of classroom hours–at least when they, I, and the students were all at their–or our–best.

If someone has never read the *Iliad*–well, conceivably it's possible that this little book may be a way for that person to get a start on it. If someone else remembers simply and passionately hating the *Iliad* because it was taught by the most boring instructor that the imagination of all of the gods could ever have produced–well, this book may offer a second shot at the poem that will work out better this time. And if yet another person is, yes, faintly or even *more* than faintly interested in the *Iliad* but is–yes again–sufficiently intimidated by the "great classic" so as to hesitate to take it off the shelf or to pay actual *money* for it–well, again, maybe *Homer For Real* will be useful in helping that person make up her mind to take the book down, go ahead and read it, doing so along with *Homer For Real.*

Anyway, I know that I hope so, in all those cases.

The great old books are good ones. And I've tried with this book of my own, as I will with the others that are to come, to write a good book, and a true one, about *that* book.

Something entirely unexpected happened to me one day last winter. I was at my computer, reading email, and I found that the "in" folder contained this:

Date: Tue, 16 Dec 2008
From: R. M.
Subject: John Jay College
To: ericlarsen@ericlarsen.net

Prof Larsen,

I have wanted to say this to you for about the past 10 years. Your ob-

> **session in making sure that my mind opened to a world that I never knew existed has helped me tremendously. I could not write, had no interest in literature, and had a hard time enunciating words. I had a very hard time articulating a thought in words and I didn't have a vocabulary. I felt like an idiot.**
>
> **I grew up in the inner city and attended inner city schools. Stereotypical Latino household and stereotypical inner city neighborhood in many regards. But it was a white guy from Minnesota who taught me how to read with an analytical skill that helped me beat the stereotype and taught me that I don't have to be that way.**
>
> **I live today with many of the teachings that were learned as a result of the readings in your classroom. I live with humility, awareness, vocabulary, and understanding. I could go on but this is an email, not a dissertation. Thank you. God bless. And if it means anything to you–you made a difference in my life and I thank you for igniting my stale mind.**
>
> **R. M.**

Ten *years!* And to be called, blessedly and openly and factually, "a white guy from Minnesota"! What a wonderfully open and honest tag, and what a wonderful piece of mail to get, as any devoted instructor, or coach, or mentor knows very, very well. I faintly remembered R. M.'s name, though I remembered nothing else about him. So I opened my bottom left desk drawer and, from the darkness in the very back, drew out all of my old grade books. It turned out that "about the past 10 years" was actually eleven years. And it also turned out that R. M. hadn't passed the course. He'd gotten an "F."

I was crushed to think of it, and sorry. But then I re-read the email

he'd sent, and then I read it yet again. It was a strong letter, and, even more, it was a confident one. And so, taking heart, I concluded that even though R. M. may have failed the course, the course, thank god, had not failed *him*. And, thank god again, he'd wanted to let me know about it.

---

[1] Although in the case of *Beloved* I'm a follower of the views of Stanley Crouch in his "Aunt Medea," from all the way back in 1987 (*Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews 1979-1989* [Oxford University Press, 1990]).

[2] A very rough number, derived by multiplying the number of class meetings in each semester (28) by the number of semesters (70). Assuming that a person taught four courses each semester, the total of classes met over thirty-five years would be 7840.

[3] Again, see Stanley Crouch (footnote, p. xiii).

[4] In truth, this old custom was a secret delight to me back then, in 1959, since it was rare but incontrovertible evidence that I had at last managed to leave high school behind.